How Does Your Site Measure Up?

If traffic is sparse, it's time for a serious usability study

LIBRARIANS SELDOM GIVE ENOUGH THOUGHT TO THE needs of potential Web-site visitors. Few librarians, for example, stop to consider how they can make their sites easy to use or more attractive. As a result, many sites have awful color schemes, hard-to-find navigation buttons, inappropriate font sizes, and confusing layouts. No wonder they don't attract much traffic.

How does your site measure up? If you're not sure, then consider doing a Web-site usability study. That's what Lisa Hill did. Hill, a Web services librarian at the King County (WA) Library System, runs her library's site (www.kcls.org). The site, which includes 20,000 links, received an impressive 22 million hits last year. But Hill has changed the site's information, links, and graphics so many times during the past eight years that she wondered if it was still effective. She also was interested in discovering how the site could be improved.

So Hill hired a research firm and, in several sessions over the past year, invited 24 site users—both adults and teens—to participate in a usability study. Each participant was asked to evaluate a list of tasks, ranging from "e-mail a question to a librarian" to "look up your library card and learn the status of your account." The researchers reported to Hill what worked and what didn't work. She sat down and made the corresponding adjustments, and a second study group was brought in, who determined that the revised site was friendlier and easier to use than its predecessor.

What did Hill learn from all of this testing? For starters, she discovered that it's best to use language that is easily understood by the average person rather than use library jargon. For example, a link on the home page titled "Community Libraries" connected visitors with a list of the library's branch locations, addresses, and phone numbers. Simple, right? But the term "community libraries" was unfamiliar to many of the study participants. So Hill changed the heading to the more straightforward "Find Your Library," which immediately clarified things for users.

Hill also learned that it doesn't pay to get too clever. She says the name "eAnswer," which the staff had coined for its online reference service, seemed catchy—until she learned that many of the test subjects didn't get it. She changed the link to "Ask a Librarian" and the problem was solved. Ditto with "Book a PC," which Hill renamed "Reserve a PC."

Hill also grilled local teens on what they liked and disliked about the library's Teen Zone site. To her surprise, they told her "they like it dreary," that is, they preferred black backgrounds, with a hint of mystery and doom. They also had distinct opinions about the Zone's colors. One teen disliked a demo page because it sported the colors of a rival high school, while another study member said that she avoids sites with too much red. "They like the colors they like and make no apologies," says Hill. To see the dark, somewhat dreary, and certainly *Matrix*-like design that most teens favored, visit www.kcls.org/teens.

If you're interested in setting up your own usability study, you don't need to hire professional researchers, the way Hill did. Hill simply recommends that librarians recruit at least eight community members—and if you're a school librarian, you'll want to make sure that group includes students, teachers, and parents. Then split the group into two sections—half of the participants should evaluate the site as it now exists, and half should evaluate it after it's been modified. Give each group member a list of all of the things that visitors can do on your Web site—such as looking up an article in a subscription database or checking for fines on their library card—and ask each evaluator to perform these tasks. Make sure you give both groups identical task lists and as they go through the evaluation process, ask them to tell you what they're thinking as they use the site. Take careful notes of their observations. Most likely, you'll be surprised by what you learn.

And whatever you do, Hill cautions, "Don't be a helpful librarian." Resist the urge to assist study participants when they're struggling with a task. Otherwise you'll never reach your ultimate goal—which is to create a Web site that's informative, fun, and easy to use when you're not there to help.

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